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ABSTRACT

Research on personality and aging has been limited by several factors, including nomothetic assumptions about traits; overreliance on morale scales as measures of adaptation; and the confounding of cohort, time of measurement and age effects. An idiographic approach, which focuses on traits that individuals subjectively feel as important, may help clarify the patterns of change and stability in adulthood and aging as well as expedite the development of better measures of adaptation and the use of sequential research designs. (Author)

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Personality and Aging:
New Directions for Research

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Perhaps the most interesting and least understood question about the aging process is how we change over the course of the years in our thinking, feeling, and experiencing of events. We wonder whether those characteristics which we deem the most important aspects of our selves will be affected by the passage of time, worrying that we may lose what we value the highest or that we will become someone we do not like. Or we consider how those problems and traits we do not like in ourselves will fare over time, whether we will finally overcome habits we feel are limiting or unattractive or if our faults may become like our noses, even more pronounced over the years. We worry about how our appearance will change and whether that will drive others away from us. And we wonder whether we might become rigid, irritable or foolish or if somewhere along the way we might acquire the wisdom and serenity that some philosophers have promised as the outcome of a good life.

Compared to the extensive research on cognitive variables, a rich and stimulating literature on personality dimensions has not emerged. Surveying the field, one is struck by the lack of development in concepts and theory. Existing studies often report confusing and conflicting findings. It has sometimes been argued that personality is too vague and undefinable a quality to operationalize in a meaningful way. The problems that exist in the literature on personality and aging, however, are not due to the vagueness of the discipline, but, rather, to more specific factors, particularly:

1) the use of a limited model of personality; 2) reliance on overly simple measures of adaptation; and 3) insufficient attention to the problems inherent in cross-sectional research.

Aging and Traits: A Limited Model

The principle approach to personality and aging has been to look at how much of a given trait is possessed by samples of young and old. The results of the numerous studies that have been made has been the creation of a confusing array of constructs (see Schein, 1968; Neugarten, 1977, for reviews). Among the variables that have been measured are: egocentrism, cautiousness, conformity, ego-strength, dependency, introversion, dogmatism, risk-taking, rigidity, sociability, emotionality, power needs, need achievement, locus of control and social responsibility.

Methodological problems have plagued many of these studies, including the use of poorly developed measures of unknown reliability, differing operational definitions of the same constructs, and small and self-selected samples (Schein, 1968; Neugarten, 1977). Furthermore, while there has been a consensus in the findings of age differences for some characteristics, rigidity and caution, for example, other dimensions have had contradictory results. Overall, there is no clear picture of how personality changes with age, only fragments of theories and research findings on sometimes artificial sounding constructs.

Recently, multivariate studies have been undertaken which focus on a broader question - whether the structure of personality changes over time (see Pierce and Chiriboga, 1979; Costa and McCrae, 1976). As Pierce and Chiriboga (1979) found, however, the dimensionality or meaning of factors obtained at one point in time may be different at subsequent testings. In their longitudinal study, assertion, hostility and social poise, were defined by somewhat different variables in the factor analysis performed at each time of testing. Hence, one cannot consider just if there have been changes in personality structure over time but whether there have been shifts in the meanings of underlying constructs.

The limitations of both the single trait and multivariate studies may be related as much to the implicit assumptions they make about personality as to methodological problems. While emphasizing the measurement of traits researchers of personality and aging have not taken into consideration criticisms of the trait model. Specifically, the value of measuring traits has been questioned because of the low correlations that have generally been found between traits and behavior, and between behaviors across various situations (see Bem and Allen, 1974; Mischel, 1976, for reviews).

Noting these results, Bem and Allen (1974) suggest that the poor predictions from traits is due to how they are viewed. As stated in the title of their article, consistencies in behavior should be expected only by "some of the people some of the time." They argue that most research has been guided by "nomothethic"

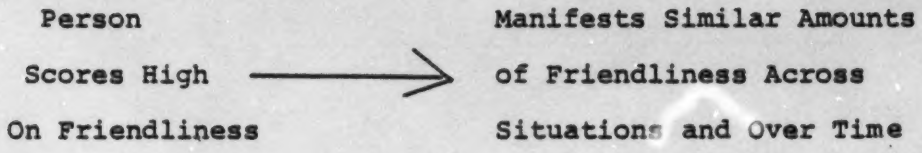
assumptions, in which a particular trait, e.g., honesty, is considered to have the same value or meaning to each person. From this perspective someone's behavior is related to how much of that trait he or she has. It would be anticipated, for example, that a person who scores high on an honesty dimension would show more honest behavior across situations than someone who has rated lower on that dimension.

According to Bem and Allen (1974), however, traits may not have the same value or relevancy from one person to another, and may predict differently from one situation to another. They propose, instead, an "idiographic" model of personality, in which there are certain key or pertinent characteristics by which individuals define themselves. What these defining dimensions are vary from one person to another. Furthermore, individuals would be expected to be relatively consistent in behaviors across situations for those characteristics which are pertinent or defining for them, while they would show less predictability in other behaviors. The critical factor is how important the personality dimension is to an individual, not how high or low he scores on it.

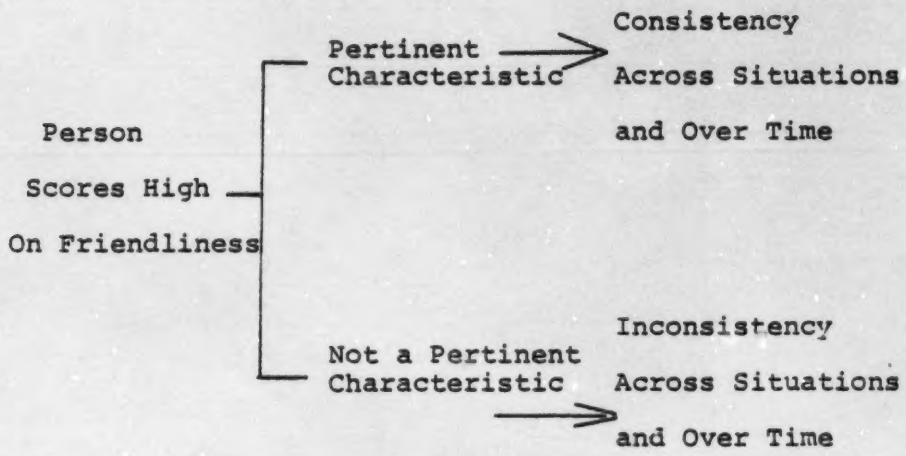
In a pilot study of their model, Bem and Allen (1974) reported that persons whose friendliness and conscientiousness were pertinent characteristics were consistent in their expressions of these behaviors across situations and were also judged more consistent by friends and relatives on those traits. In contrast, individuals for whom these were not relevant personal dimensions described

Figure 1. Nomothetic versus Idiographic Approach to the Study of Personality and Aging

A. Nomothetic Assumptions



B. The Idiographic Approach



Adapted from Bem and Allen (1974)

themselves and were rated by others as less consistent across situations, irrespective of how high they scored on pencil and paper tests of these traits.

While Bem and Allen (1974) addressed the issue of the low predictability in behaviors across situations, their observations are relevant to the aging person who is exposed over time to new situations and to varying contingencies of old situations. If the same relations hold in how people change over time as across situations, then it would be expected that there are different patterns of change in salient, compared to less central characteristics. The latter would be more likely to be influenced by situational factors and social expectations for how one is supposed to grow old. On the other hand, one's central characteristics would probably be relatively stable, even as environmental demands change. In addition, these more enduring characteristics would differ from one person to another.

Several lines of investigation using an idiographic model of personality and aging can be suggested, including: 1) retrospective studies, in which older persons describe how they perceive they have changed in their defining characteristics; 2) cross-sectional comparisons to determine what characteristics tend to be frequently seen as pertinent by young and old; and 3) sequential studies that follow how a person's defining and less central characteristics change over time. By identifying characteristics that are both subjectively important to the individual and have value in predicting behavior, these studies would lead to a more cogent understanding of

whether and how we change over time than currently exists.

Well Being As A Measure of Adaptation

A second problem in the literature on personality and aging is the reliance on measures of well-being and life satisfaction as indicators of the adequacy of adaptation. There has been considerable research on whether a certain life-style such as active or disengaged, or if possessing some other personal quality is related to successful aging. Morale or life satisfaction, however, are not good indicators of adaptation for several reasons. First, they are inappropriate when assessing an institutionalized sample or any other group of aged persons in which there are likely to be persons with senile dementia. Brain damaged older persons tend to deny any problems or difficulties, with denial more pervasive when there is greater brain impairment (Zarit and Kahn, 1974). As a consequence, an older person with senile dementia may report greater life satisfaction or higher morale as the consequence of increasing brain pathology, and not because he possesses a certain trait, is active or inactive, or has participated in a particular treatment program. Among the non-brain damaged elderly, measures of well-being or life satisfaction may also reflect a tendency to deny problems. Since the various scales that have been used have generally not included a correction factor for social desirability, responses may reflect the concern of some older persons to give the "right" answers or to portray themselves in a positive light in

Figure 2 Limits of Life Satisfaction Measures

A. Responses reflect social desirability.

B. Cognitively-impaired elderly report more satisfaction as their deficits increase.

C. They are appropriate as aggregate, not individual measures of adaptation. There is no control for unique meanings people give to questions.

D. They are too restricted as measures of adaptation.

the researcher's eyes. Since today's cohort of elderly are less educated and less sophisticated about research on the average than younger persons, one should not minimize the effects of this type of response bias on any rating scale.

The most critical limitation of measures of well-being or life satisfaction is that the meaning of the scores are ambiguous, and it is by no means certain that a person reporting more positive affect is better adapted than someone else reporting less. In measures of mood that have been developed with clinical samples, the scores of groups of anxious or depressed patients, for example, have been found to differ in some statistical sense from those of non-patient samples. A person whose scores improve on such a measure thereby moves from a range in which one's affect is usually dysfunctional to a condition that is more typical of the general population, and not associated with impaired functioning. In contrast, the fluctuations of morale of a non-patient sample do not necessarily have a similar relation to adaptation. Differences in morale scores in non-clinical samples have not been validated as indicating different levels of adaptation. Larson (1978) suggests that the various measures of well-being represent statements about affect one would make in everyday conversations and cannot be used as an index of mental health. In fact, higher morale may not consistently be associated with better adaptation. According to Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1973) older persons who were judged by trained observers as more complex and creative, reported greater levels of negative affect than "simple" persons, who made

few demands on their environment, and were judged as less resourceful and less well adapted by raters.

Alternative ways of looking at the quality of a person's adaptation would be to focus on self-descriptions and patterns of activities in which the person engages. In studies of outcome in psychotherapy , Rogers and Dymond (1954) found that with successful treatment there was a decrease in the discrepancy in descriptions between how one saw oneself and how one would like to be. A similar notion could be applied to a person's activities. One could determine what it is a person currently does and what it is he would like to be doing. It seems plausible that persons with a greater discrepancy between what they are doing and what they would like to be doing would describe themselves and would be described by others as more poorly adapted to their current situation than those with smaller discrepancies. Certainly assessing individuals this way would yield richer findings than merely finding out if they are active or disengaged.

This type of approach has also been suggested by Flanagan (1978). Based on the responses of national surveys of three cohorts, 30, 50 and 70 year olds, he identified 15 areas or components which are related to the quality of life. Among the areas are such things as material comforts, health and personal safety, relationships to family and friends, creative expression, and recreational activities. Flanagan also asked his sample how well their needs were met in these 15 components. The oldest cohort reported their needs for

community and political participation were better met than the young, but they also indicated less satisfaction with opportunities for learning, and, as might be expected, work. There were also some important sex differences. The needs of older women for a close relationship with a husband were not being met, reflecting the high rate of widowhood and limited opportunities to form new attachments. On the other hand, other social needs, such as relationships to friends, were better met in older women than older men. Older men, in contrast to both older women and younger men, were more dissatisfied with opportunities for creative expression and recreational activities. Coupled with their lack of satisfaction with work activities, these findings suggest that many older men may feel unfulfilled in important areas of their lives.

Sequential Studies of Personality and Aging

The third problem in existing research on personality and aging is the lack of sequential studies. According to Schaie and Parham (1976) several patterns of change must be considered. First, it is possible that some traits are strongly influenced by hereditary factors or are shaped by the environment in early childhood, and remain relatively constant over the lifespan. Second, some traits may be influenced and modified by social events that occur at specific points during the life cycle, including marriage, parenthood, career changes, and in later life, the losses that become increasingly prevalent. Third, there may be traits which are modified in response to social and cultural changes. In addition, as the Bem and Allen (1974) analysis suggests, traits which are affected by environmental

events or social change or even by early childhood influences may vary from one individual to another.

Most of the research on personality and aging has been cross-sectional, raising the possiblity that the findings of age differences reflect a generational effect, rather than age changes. Cohort effects are theoretically more strongly related to personality than cognitive abilities, upon which they have a marked influence (Schaie, 1975). In a few exceptions there have been longitudinal studies of single cohorts, but the results of findings may be unique to that generation or may confound age changes with the effects of historical events (Schaie and Parham, 1976). To make a more accurate estimate of the effects of aging, cohort and social and cultural events on personality, Schaie and Parham (1976) propose using a cross-sequential, time sequential research design, in which several cohorts are followed longitudinally. This method makes it possible to estimate the effects of cohort differences by seeing if initial age differences between cohorts remain stable or change over time. Thus, if 65- and 70-year-olds differ in ratings of dependency at an initial testing, the finding at a 5-year follow-up that the 65-year olds turned 70 now have similar dependency ratings suggests an age change. If the results instead showed that the ratings in dependency of these two cohorts have not changed over time, that would suggest the importance of cohort. Similarly, one can contrast the findings of two or more cohorts making the transition from 65 to 70. Comparable patterns of change in two generations from 65 to 70 indicate the effects of developmental processes, while different patterns suggest that unique historical events that occurred in one or both 5-year-periods

Figure 3 The Limitations of Cross-Sectional Research: Cohort, Time and Age Changes in a Sequential Study.

Cohort Differences	Time Changes	Age Changes
Outgoing	Excitability	Excitability
Excitability	Suspicions	Universal Political
Super-Ego Strength	Practical	Concern
Internal Restraints		
Suspicions		
Practical		
Conservatism		
Group Dependency		
Self-Sentiment		

Adapted from Schaie and Parham (1976).

had differing effects on personality of the cohorts.

Schaie and Parham (1976) applied this method of analysis to persons who were evaluated at successive 7-year intervals and who ranged in age from 22 to 71 at the time of initial measurement. Using a factor analysis of questionnaire data, they obtained 13 factors similar to dimensions of the 16 PF scale (Cattell, 1957), and also six attitudinal measures. They found cohort differences in 9 of their 13 factors and 4 of the attitudinal measures. Age changes were apparent for only two factors, excitability and universal political concern, both of which increased with age. In addition, between the years 1963 to 1970, there were time changes in several traits; that is, characteristics that showed a similar direction of change in several cohorts. These included developing a practical, down-to-earth style, decreased positive interest in financial support and universal political concern, and increases in conservatism and group dependency. These time changes are presumably the result of the cultural and political climate of that era. Other sequential studies have also indicated significant cohort effects on overall adjustment (Woodruff and Birren, 1972) and rigidity (Schaie and Labouvie-Vief, 1974).

This research has two major implications for the study of personality and aging. First, it is apparent from the findings that a major source of differences between young and old in psychological traits is due to cohort differences, rather than changes in age. Second, there was evidence of considerable change over time in many of these dimensions. The results emphasize the

importance of social and cultural changes. In fact, the authors suggest little evidence of characteristics that have a life-long stability because of the effects of biological factors or early childhood socialization (Schaie and Parham, 1976). These findings indicate that in evaluating personality in older persons it is important to consider the influence of cohort and social change on behavior, as well as developmental changes.

SUMMARY

Research on personality and aging has been limited by several factors, including nomethetic assumptions about traits, over-reliance on morale scales as measures of adaptation and the confounding of cohort, time of measurement and age effects. An idiographic approach, which focuses on traits that individuals subjectively feel as important, will help clarify the patterns of change and stability in adulthood and aging. Other changes that are recommended are the development of better measures of adaptation and the use of sequential research designs.

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